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World Chronicle

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

In 1974, the United Nations established the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to promote economic and social development among the Arab countries of the region. At a later stage, Egypt applied for admission and became a member. The Commission coordinates its activities with other United Nations agencies serving the area. The activities of ESCWA are carried out by its four committees in the areas of statistics, social development, energy, and water resources. It also established an Advisory Committee to serve as a reservoir for technical experts from the region to be utilized by the member states of the Commission. These and other related issues are discussed by Mr. Hazem El-Biblawi, Executive Secretary of ESCWA.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Since its establishment in 1974, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, or ESCWA, has been working to promote economic and social development in the Arab countries of the region. But in recent years a number of factors have had a significant effect on the overall economic development and social progress in the area. In addition, upheaval and conflict in the region have created considerable uncertainty and forced ESCWA to change headquarters a number of times. What are the activities of ESCWA? And has this regional commission made a difference in the socioeconomic development of the region?

Our guest today is an expert in the work of the Commission as well as the economic and social affairs of the region. He is Hazem El-Biblawi, Executive Secretary of ESCWA. Joining me to talk with Mr. El-Biblawi are Mohamed Saad of the Voice of America and Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London.

Mr. El-Biblawi, welcome to World Chronicle.

EL-BIBLAWI: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Executive Secretary, it seems to me that your Commission is a slightly strange entity. On the one hand, you have Egypt, which is mostly in Africa, as a member; you have Iran, which is in Western Asia, which is not a member; and, of course, for political reasons Israel, which is also in Western Asia, is not a member. Can you explain how this Commission was set up and why certain countries were included and others excluded?

EL-BIBLAWI: Well, the idea of regional commissions started early after the establishment of the United Nations. And it started with two regional commissions, one in Europe and one in Latin America. This was around '46-'47. And then there was another regional commission for Asia and the Pacific, and lately one for Africa. So the only region which had no group and no regional commission was this part of the world, in Western Asia —

LITTLEJOHNS: Which we generally call the Middle East, not Western Asia.

EL-BIBLAWI: Which we generally call the Middle East. So in the early '70s was the oil boom, and the importance of the region in terms of strategy and the role of the Arabs, and it was decided to create a regional commission for this part of the world. And at that time the word, the term "Middle East" was not very popular.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why was that?

EL-BIBLAWI: Because it refers to a geographic — actually, I — it's not well defined. It gained some importance later, after some time —

LITTLEJOHNS: I mean, it was the Middle East or the Near East, as the case may be, looking at it from the perspective of Europe, is that it? Is that the reason why it was...?

EL-BIBLAWI: Perhaps it had some undertones, because it refers it to an idea where the centre of the world, it was Europe, and then the Near East, Middle East and Far East. Anyway, I think it was the Indians who have this idea of having Western Asia as opposed to Western Europe, for instance. Anyway, when the idea came in '74, it was grouping all the Arab States. But of course it would have been —

LITTLEJOHNS: So why didn't you call it the Commission of Arab States?

EL-BIBLAWI: I would think it would have a bad taste for an organization like the United Nations, which makes no difference between cultures and creeds and races. So if you call it Arab, I don't think it will fit very well with the nature and the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations. So, at its beginning, it included only the Arab States in Asia without Egypt. And then later —

LITTLEJOHNS: Without Egypt?

EL-BIBLAWI: Without Egypt. Then Egypt applied to join.

LITTLEJOHNS: But — excuse me just a minute — is Egypt a member of the Economic Commission for Africa as well?

EL-BIBLAWI: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: So it's a member of two.

EL-BIBLAWI: As a matter of fact, this is not the only case. For instance, you'll find the United States is a member of ECLAC, which is Latin America, is a member of ECE, which is Europe, is a member of ESCAP, which is Asia and [the Pacific]. And now you find all the newly independent Central Asian [countries], they are both members of the ECE, which is Europe, and ESCAP. So it is not a unique case, but at that time Egypt was the first case to have a double membership in both ECA, which is Africa, and Western Asia.

LITTLEJOHNS: And Iran was excluded because it's not an Arab country?

EL-BIBLAWI: I think at that time the initiative came from the Arab countries, and perhaps Iran was not interested at that time to join. But the important thing is not the past, the important thing is how to configure this regional commission for the future.

SAAD: Now, as a follow-up to Michael's question, how do you intend to meet the demands of the future, as now Israel is part of the Middle East, the greater Middle East, and these opportunities of cooperation, economical? How do you intend to develop your role?

EL-BIBLAWI: Let us agree on one thing: What the commissions do is what the Member States want to do. It's not something for the Secretariat to decide. I'm simply a civil servant in the service of the Member States. And I think for the time being talking about enlarging and including other members is premature. But the idea is there, that we have in this

region a number of regional organizations. We have a region which is, by the way, one of the most homogenous regions in the world. If you look, for instance, to the other regional commissions you don't find this kind of homogeneity. For instance, you talk about Asia and the Pacific — it's a combination of sub-regions: the most rich, Japan; the poorest, Bangladesh. But this region is homogenous in every respect except one, which is important — I'll come to that. So I would imagine that for the time being it is including this part of the world. It has an advantage, it's homogenous. But it is based on voluntary, it has to be agreed by the Member States. But if in the future peace comes, every one with established relationship, I don't think there will be a major problem to include other members. But this has to be prepared by a full settlement, an agreement, a normal relationship to the satisfaction of everyone.

WILLIAMS: When you say "the members", are you talking about the members of ESCAP, the members of the Economic and Social Commission here at headquarters, or the members of the General Assembly?

EL-BIBLAWI: No, the members of ESCWA. This is a group —

WILLIAMS: The existing members.

EL-BIBLAWI: — the existing members — who agreed among themselves to have this Commission to serve their regional interests.

WILLIAMS: Do they finance it, or is it financed from the Secretariat?

EL-BIBLAWI: No, it's financed from the Secretariat.

WILLIAMS: So it's a case almost of representation — taxation without representation, if the local members —

EL-BIBLAWI: No, but it's an expediency, that you cannot serve a group of people unless they feel themselves that it is a club. And in order for such a club to be effective, they must feel, all of them, mutually accepting each other. So I think it would be counterproductive, not only for this Commission, but for any commission, to impose any member which is not accepted. He will not benefit; others will not benefit. Because, after all, the effectiveness of this Commission as an organization is dependent on how the Member States will treat it. If they think that this is something of their own, it will benefit and flourish. If they just neglect it, it will die. So I don't think that we should think that on a logical or a geographic thing we have to impose on it. It is something to be agreed upon among the Member States. Having said so, I think because the region has a multiplicity of regional organizations — it is not the only one: we have the Arab League, we have the Islamic Conference — we have so many regional organizations, so each one of them should have a different objective and a different mandate where it can have a rather comparative advantage compared to the other. I think ours has a comparative advantage. The fact that it is part of

the United Nations, which makes no discrimination of race, culture, whatever, so it is based on the idea that there are some geo-economic problems which are important to all the Member States, and it can take care of it. And these geo-economic problems sometimes just transcend language, or even religion. For instance, water for this region is a major problem for the future. You cannot discuss water with the exclusion of Turkey. For instance, if you are talking about something —

LITTLEJOHNS: Has Turkey ever applied for membership?

EL-BIBLAWI: Not yet. Turkey is a member of ECE, Europe, but applied last year to ESCAP, which is the Asia —

LITTLEJOHNS: Asia and the Pacific.

EL-BIBLAWI: Asia and the Pacific. And the reason — there is reason, because it's not only — it has a political — because Turkey finds herself in economic community with Europe, but also Turkey has strategic interests with the Central Asian. And since the Central Asians are in both the European Commission and in Asia and the Pacific, I think Turkey found herself that she should link herself.... So far the Turkish foreign policy does not give that attention to the Middle East or Western Asia.

WILLIAMS: No attempts to recreate the Ottoman Empire! [LAUGH]

EL-BIBLAWI: As a matter of fact — this is my personal feeling — still there is a reaction. I think that the Ottoman Empire was such a disappointment to the Turks, the way it was dismantled and dismembered, so perhaps the time will come when we can all overcome our bad memory.

WILLIAMS: Having established what you are, one of the things that intrigues me is that the United Nations Development Programme has almost exactly the same remit within the area, and it has a Regional Bureau for Arab States which covers all of your members plus the Arabs who have fallen off the edge of your map — Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. What do you do that they don't do, or vice versa?

EL-BIBLAWI: Okay. You are referring to a problem where each organization of the UN has sometimes its own definition of the boundaries of the region. For instance, as a regional commission we have only the Arab States in Asia plus Egypt. UNDP, they have the Arab Bureau, which covers Arab States mostly in Asia and in Africa. You go to the —

WILLIAMS: I'm more concerned about the actual work that they do in this area.

EL-BIBLAWI: As a matter of fact, in this regard we have so many joint activities with the Arab Bureau. In many cases we join activity with ECA. For instance, we have just signed an agreement —

LITTLEJOHNS: That's the Economic Commission for Africa.

EL-BIBLAWI: Africa, yes. So when it comes to cover — for instance, we have a big project for gender statistics to cover the whole of the Arab world.

LITTLEJOHNS: What statistics?

EL-BIBLAWI: Gender. So we, jointly with ECA, are doing the job. We are taking the part for our Member States and ECA is taking the other part for North Africa.

SAAD: We have been talking about the goals of the Commission, but you didn't tell us what are the benefits the countries of the region gained since the formation of the Commission.

EL-BIBLAWI: There is widespread feeling that most developing countries, again, when you give them money.... We don't give money, first of all; we are not a bank. We are implementing projects in the area of economic and social, which cover so many sectors. What we are doing for them is, I think, quite useful. We are a source for data and information. So we are publishing a survey on the economic and social activity in the region. But we are providing also other services in other areas. Over and above the studies we are undertaking, for instance, we have a lot of studies on ground water, on surface water, using new techniques for water, the use of new sources of energy, renewable energy. So, we cover so many things in studies. We have studies, we have so many training activities, we have workshops, we have expert group meetings. But over and above we are a forum for the experts from the different Member States to meet together. For instance, we have technical committees. For instance, I have just completed a meeting for the statistical committee. This is all the Member States, all the heads of the statistics, they meet together, discuss, under the supervision of ESCWA, to agree and exchange their experience, to learn from each other, to agree on normalizing and standardizing the terminology, the practice. So what we are doing is, first of all, studies, research, expert meetings, training. But over and above, we have also a very effective service. We have a group of experts, we call them the regional advisers.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. El-Biblawi, may I interrupt you just a moment? We have to re-identify the programme. This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Hazem El-Biblawi, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

EL-BIBLAWI: So, if I tell you how we are working, we have two ways of doing our job. One, which is our regular programme, it is agreed upon for two years after the submission to the Member States what we are doing in every section — in statistics, in agriculture, in energy, in scienfce and technology. It is agreed beforehand what we are going to do in the next two years in each of these sectors. But over and above this, what we call the regular programme, we have a group of experts, we call them the regional advisers. And we send their CVs to the different States. We have a regional adviser in energy, in telecommunication, in trade and GATT matters, in environment, in statistics, in national accounts. So the Member

States know the CVs and the qualifications of each of them. If they have a problem, they request his services to solve a problem in the country concerned. So this —

LITTLEJOHNS: So who pays them?

EL-BIBLAWI: It's for free. It's for free. And it's very important, what I'm going to say, that in the past, for instance, you take — some of our Member States are known to be very rich, at least the [Persian] Gulf States —

LITTLEJOHNS: Saudi Arabia, for example? Kuwait?

EL-BIBLAWI: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait. And they could afford to recruit the best consultant in the world, and they did in the past. But to my surprise, as of late, I see that they are requesting too many of our regional advisers, for two reasons: One, because they are available and cheap, but I think the most important thing is that they feel that our regional advisers are not only competent but neutral. When you recruit a consultant from a country to give you its opinion, sometimes his opinions are biased to help his country. I will give you advice on the kind of technology which is produced in my home country. If I am a consultant from Germany, I might give you advice to use the technologies that are more or less available in Germany rather than in Italy. So I think these Member States feel that we are neutral, we have no bias whatsoever. So this kind of service —

LITTLEJOHNS: Are they all Arabs, by the way? The consultants?

EL-BIBLAWI: This is very important. You raised a very important thing. They are Arabs, and this is — at least Arabic-speaking. In our case they are Arabs. Because they are not dealing with the top official, they are not dealing with Prime Ministers, they are dealing mainly with —

LITTLEJOHNS: Technical people.

EL-BIBLAWI: — middle rank. So unless they have a working language, they cannot bring the message through, unless they are talking the same language. So I think it was wise, because before these regional advisers were grouped in headquarters, and a few years ago, three or four years ago, there was a measure of decentralization. I think in our case this was crucial, not only in terms of cost effectiveness — they are nearby — but in terms of knowledge of the region, because they are from the region, in terms of effectiveness. They know how to deal with the people. They are talking to a director, a sub-director — this is very important. The other thing: Though they are going to individual countries, they are giving them their advice with a regional perspective in their minds. He will advise Syria, for instance, but two months later he will go to Qatar. So when he will advise Syria he will advise in such a way that can bring together a regional approach. So in a way it looks as if it's country-oriented, but it has a regional perspective.

WILLIAMS: Looking at the statistics that you were talking about before, you can fine tune them, but they all come up — because one of the things about the region is it's not just homogenous in language but almost every country involved has a huge disparity in wealth between the poor and the rich, and also very high illiteracy levels, especially amongst women. And that's universal across the region. So here you have two very concrete unrelated problems, because with illiteracy comes poverty. What have you — can you think of something concrete that you've done recently that will enhance — can you — have you pioneered new ways to teach Arabic, the Fusha — the classical Arabic — so that people can read and write in their own language?

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned this gender thing, for example, I mean, that's —

WILLIAMS: Exactly.

EL-BIBLAWI: There are, in this regard, there are so many levels how to bring results about. First of all, there is conceptual. For instance, we are talking how to measure the participation of women. So we have to agree on certain indicators which will help us to know what is the situation. Because unless we have — of course there are so many conventional statistical data, we know about this birth age, but if we want to know indicators about poverty, about women's participation, we have to agree on the concepts and introduce these new concepts into the statistical apparatus. So, first of all, there is a conceptual phase where we agree on concepts in order to find what are the most relevant indicators to cover a certain phenomenon. Then, agreed on this, it's not enough to agree on this, but we have to educate people. So we ask for expert group meetings, we discuss with them to see what is the degree of acceptability, because sometimes they don't agree unless we — until we get a sort of a consensus on what can be adjusted. And then we can make a recommendation for them to implement this kind of thing.

This is precisely what we are doing in the gender statistics. We are trying to find what are the best indicators to show the status of women's participation in every aspect of the social life, not only in political, but in every aspect. And then, having agreed on that, we have to convince the Member State and see where are the resistance points. And then we devise a system which can be agreed upon.

SAAD: Well, Mr. Secretary, do you think you have really changed the life of the people in the area?

EL-BIBLAWI: If I say we did, that will be too much.

SAAD: To some extent, at least.

EL-BIBLAWI: What I can say is that in the past this economic commission, as has been rightly said, suffered a great deal from the unsettling situation of the region. Moving from one place to the other, not simply moving, but the reasons for the move —

LITTLEJOHNS: That was mainly moving from Lebanon to Amman, wasn't it?

EL-BIBLAWI: As a matter of fact —

WILLIAMS: And before that, Baghdad.

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, you went to Baghdad, all the way —

EL-BIBLAWI: Yes.

WILLIAMS: The [Persian] Gulf war chased them out of Baghdad, the civil war chased them out of Beirut.

EL-BIBLAWI: If I tell you the story of our movements, you will discover —

WILLIAMS: The nomadic traditions!

EL-BIBLAWI: — it's a nomadic region and we're having a nomadic —

SAAD: This is a tradition.

EL-BIBLAWI: But we started —

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, we shouldn't be laughing about it, after all.

EL-BIBLAWI: So the fact of moving, which is creating a lot of uncertainty, a lot of anxiety and feeling of belonging, and — but also the reason for this moving was that the region itself was in an uncertain situation. This also affected the morale of the people. The people, you have an organization, the organization is not only a mandate, a mission, it's a —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean in your secretariat.

EL-BIBLAWI: Yes, of course. If you are taking the people from one place to the other, before they are settled, they don't know if they are going to another place or not, this is very important. So in the past, this Commission has suffered a great deal from the circumstances of the region. However, given this very difficult situation, I would say that the Commission serves a purpose, not to the extent that one would have liked, but, given the circumstances, I would say at least it preserves its identity, it preserves its existence. But I think what is now very important is that the region is poised for a new era, and unless there are regional organizations which can take care of the future of the region — and I, in my first discussion I mentioned that this region is homogenous in every respect save one, I didn't elaborate on this — this region is homogenous in culture, language, habit, customs, name it, except —

LITTLEJOHNS: Religion also to a great extent.

EL-BIBLAWI: In everything. And even the difference in religion, but they belong to the same family — the old, great, monotheistic, which is the same culture, the same perception of the world, save the economic relations. This is a region which is compact, but economically — it's not an economic region. Only eight or seven or ten per cent maximum of inter-trade relationship between. So this situation is, to my mind, close to the situation of Europe after the Second World War. They have the same culture, the same background, the

same history, but fighting each other. And each major State was trading with its colonies rather than with its neighbours. So it took them to create, to fabricate economic unity. And it was created by people of vision, but also through regional organization. So what we need here in this region is something of the sort. To create — not because we have an economic region, we don't have an economic region, we have a region in every respect except that....

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. El-Biblawi, that's all the time we have. I would like to allow you to go on and on, because it's a very interesting subject. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

EL-BIBLAWI: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Our guest has been Hazem El-Biblawi, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. He was interviewed by Mohamed Saad of the Voice of America and Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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